

THURSDAY, JULY 28, 1881

MISS GORDON CUMMING'S "FIJI"

At Home in Fiji. By C. F. Gordon Cumming. In Two Volumes. With Map and Illustrations. Second Edition. (London: Blackwood and Sons, 1881.)

MISS GORDON CUMMING is a most indefatigable traveller, daunted by no hardships or discomforts, ready to push her way anywhere, and as happy and contented almost in a Fijian dwelling as if at home. She has travelled over most of the world, and being a most skilful draughtswoman, has, like Miss North, brought back with her a vast series of large coloured sketches of all the principal points of interest visited by her. Whilst however Miss North's fine and most instructive collection is executed in oils, the author of the present work sketches in water colours. Miss Gordon Cumming's drawings are very beautiful and, as all those who have been fortunate enough to see them can testify, extremely faithful representations of the scenes which they depict, and she has sketched some of the most interesting scenes existing, such as the hot springs and geysers of New Zealand, the ruined ancient cities of Ceylon, the summit of Adam's peak at sunrise, with the curious coloured edged shadow then cast by the mountain, and the ever-surging lava lakes of Kilauea in Hawaii. She went to Fiji as companion to Lady Gordon on the appointment of Sir Arthur Gordon as first governor of the islands in the beginning of 1875. She stayed there more than a year and a half, seeing a great deal of the people and constantly travelling in various parts of the group. The present book is a bright and pleasant account of what she saw and did. She made a large series of sketches, and seven of these, reproduced by the autotype process, illustrate the present work. Any one who knows Fiji will at once recognise the minute accuracy with which they represent the scenery of that beautiful group, though they are, of course, but feeble substitutes for the coloured originals.

It is pleasing to learn that the Wesleyan missionaries, to whom the entire credit of the civilisation of the Fijis is due, expressed their satisfaction at the annexation when it actually took place. They certainly had very serious apprehensions as to its effect on the well-being of the native population some years before, when the matter was only under consideration. It is a pity indeed that the hoary old cannibal Thackombau was taken down to Sydney to bring back the measles to his islands and thus destroy a third of the population. The difficulties of the problem with which Sir Arthur Gordon had to deal at the outset of his governorship were greatly enhanced and complicated by the effects of this terrible mishap. It is pleasing to learn that old Thackombau is still as fond of his bible as when we saw him seven years ago; he cannot read it, apparently, but, as our authoress tells us, "it makes him feel so good." No doubt if he could read some of the battle scenes in Kings he would feel better still.

Fijians seem to be rather a failure as domestic servants.

"Day after day you must show them exactly how everything is to be done, and may be certain that each time it will be done wrong, and that the moment your

back is turned they will proceed to bruise up a bit of tobacco in a banana leaf and deliberately smoke their cigarette before touching the work you have given them. Probably they will follow you to ask where the matches are, and the only answer to any remonstrance is 'malua' (by and by), a universal principle which is the bane of Fijian life. They are honest, though sometimes they cannot resist borrowing large English bath towels, which make most tempting *sulus* (kilts), and nice cambric handkerchiefs are a tempting covering for carefully dressed hair. It would be right and proper that they should use things belonging to their own chiefs, so we need not wonder that they cannot always discriminate."

The authoress was especially struck by the absence of flowers in the island, and describes this fact as all the more striking to her after a voyage direct from Australia (Sydney), where the whole country was aflame with blossom. She walked day after day till she was weary without finding as many flowers as would fill a small vase. She bears testimony, on the other hand, to the profusion of ferns. Mr. Wallace has dwelt in his work on "Island Life" on the causes to which this absence of flowers in oceanic islands is due. Miss Gordon Cumming's testimony on the matter is interesting.

Sir Arthur Gordon was punctilious in matters of native etiquette, and constantly attended kaava yangona drinkings. It is quite new to us to learn that the process of preparing kaava by chewing in Fiji was imported from Tonga, and that in the interior the old custom of grating the pepper root survives. If this statement is correct the process must have come from Tonga some time ago, for the root is only grated there now by order of the missionaries, who introduced this method in order to prevent the spread of disease occurring in consequence of the chewing. As chewing was the method adopted originally all over Polynesia, it would be strange if Fiji had been an exception in the matter.

Some remarks are made in the work on the so-called *orthodox* mode of Fijian spelling, that is to say, the strange mode of spelling which the missionaries have thought fit to adopt. According to this spelling Thackombau is spelt Cacobau, *c* being used instead of *th*, and an *n* sound, which invariably occurs before *d*, *g*, and *q*, being omitted in the spelling. There seems nothing to be gained and all to be lost by this arrangement, a mere going out of the way to create a difficulty, unless indeed it be a device to prevent the Fijians when taught to read and write Fijian from being able to read English.

Amongst the crowds of plantation labourers from all parts of Polynesia the authoress specially mentions the Tokelau islanders, "with their long straight hair, large dark eyes, and sallow faces." There is something very peculiar in the Tokelau race, and we believe there is much of importance yet to be made out with regard to it. Every visitor to Levuka cannot help being struck at once by the very marked difference in appearance between the Tokelau men and women and all other Polynesians and Melanesians taken together amongst the labour population of the place. They alone of all the islanders can be recognised in any crowd at once by any one without any fear of mistake. They have a Mongolian look, and we cannot help thinking there is something remarkable in their origin, although their language is very closely allied to Samoan.

A lively account is given of a Palolo fishery, which

the authoress was lucky enough to witness. There is a great deal in the book about cannibalism. A representation of one of the well-known so-called cannibal forks adorns the covers of the books. These forks are so much prized by visitors as curiosities that we caught a boy on the Rewa River making a couple of trade ones, and have got one of them now in our possession. It is a mistake to suppose that they were never used for eating any food except long pig (*bokola*). A young chief of one of the mountain tribes was asked whether women joined practically in the delights of cannibal feasts: he said, "I'd like to see the woman that would not eat her full share." He bore testimony to the superiority of long over short pig as food.

An interesting account is given of one of the native missionary meetings and of the set dances (*meke*) which take place at them. One of the most curious dances described is one representing a tide rising on a reef:—

"The idea to be conveyed is that of a tide gradually rising on a reef, till at length there remains only a little coral isle, round which the angry breakers rage, flinging their white foam on every side. At first the dancers form in long lines and approach silently, to represent the quiet advance of the waves. After a while the lines break up into smaller companies, which advance with outspread hands and bodies bent forward to represent rippling wavelets, the tiniest waves being represented by children. Quicker and quicker they come on, now advancing, now retreating, yet, like true waves, steadily progressing and gradually closing on every side of the imaginary islet round which they play or battle after the manner of breakers, springing high in mid-air, and flinging their arms far above their heads to represent the action of spray. As they leap and toss their heads, the soft white *masi* or native cloth (which for greater effect they wear as a turban with long streamers, and also wear round the waist, whence it floats in long scarf-like ends) trembles and flutters in the breeze. The whole effect is most artistic, and the orchestra do their part by imitating the roar of the surf on the reef—a sound which to them has been a never-ceasing lullaby from the hour of their birth."

The Fijians are, with little doubt, the best dancers in the world, and it is interesting to contrast their condition in this respect with that of ourselves, amongst whom dancing has degenerated in proportion as music has become highly developed, until it may almost be said that practically only one dance survives amongst us, and that a monotonous performance, which, by a very slight revival, is just being promoted from two to three steps. Yet Englishmen can dance when the Fijians teach them. All the dancers were of course fantastically painted.

"We were chiefly puzzled and attracted by one very fine fellow, all painted black, with a huge wreath and neck garland of scarlet hybiscus and green leaves, and rattling garters made of many hanging strings of large cockle-shells, and the usual *liku* (a sort of kilt or waist drapery) of fringes of coloured pandanus leaves. Of course he carried a club, and was barefooted. This man distinguished himself greatly, and afterwards acted the part of a huge dog in a dance where all the children appeared on all fours as cats. Eventually we discovered him to be a European known as Jack Cassell."

When the short war with the Kai Volos, the till then unsubdued cannibals of the mountainous interior of Viti Levu, took place, all the chiefs sent small detachments of fighting men to the governor to help in the fight. One hundred and fifty such men came from Mbau. They

marched up on to the governor's lawn armed with Tower muskets, and performed the wildest war *meke*, ending with unearthly yells. They then advanced two or three at a time, brandishing their weapons, and trying who could make the most valiant boast concerning his intended progress. One cried, "I go to the mountains, my feet shall eat the grass." This was to express his eager speed. Another, "I long to be gone, I crave to meet the foes. You need not fear; here is your safeguard." "This is only a musket," cried another, "but I carry it." Said the next, "We go to war; what hinders that we should fill all the ovens?"—a hungry cannibal ally that. One company which advanced with more stately gait, "This is Bau, that is enough."

It makes our legs tingle now a little to hear that a boy was torn and killed by one of the freshwater sharks, *Carcharias Gangeticus*, inhabiting the great Kewa River in Viti Levu during Miss Gordon Cumming's stay there, for we spent most of one night in and out of the water of the river not so long ago, pushing off our boat as she grounded constantly with the falling tide. We trusted to the sharks in the upper part of the river being only small ones, but the boy was killed at a distance of thirty miles from its mouth. The authoress had bathed in the river herself occasionally. She does not seem to be aware that the shark in question regularly inhabits the fresh water.

We cannot follow the authoress in her account of Fijian feasts, Fijian puddings—twenty-one feet in circumference—Fijian weddings, where the bride's dress is so cumbersome that it is carried by her friends to the church and put on outside on the shore under the cocoanut trees; of the hot springs of Savu Savu, used for cooking and for getting rid of superfluous babies; of the details of the process of making the beautiful Fijian pottery, and many other matters on which we would wish to dwell.

The book loses somewhat in general effect from being retained in the form of a series of letters, an arrangement always somewhat irksome to the general reader. Perhaps also for the taste of many there is a little too much about the missionaries in the book; but as there were 900 Wesleyan chapels in the islands, and, as said before, the missionaries have brought about all the civilisation existing, they necessarily must appear a good deal in such a work. They seem sometimes to excite the admiration of their flock in a rather dangerous direction. An old ex-cannibal crept close to one who apparently is somewhat stout, "and then, as if he could not refrain, he put out his hand and stroked him down the thigh, licking his lips, and exclaiming with delight, 'Oh! but you are nice and fat.'" We always thought that Fijians, like cannibals elsewhere, had found out by experience that white men are comparatively poor eating.

We thank Miss Gordon Cumming much for her very interesting book, but before we close this notice we have one bone to pick with her. She falls into the really unpardonable popular error of talking of coral insects, and even talks of the parrot-fish extracting from the coral the insects on which it feeds. We hope she will learn before a third edition of her work appears that the animals, the skeletons of which are commonly called corals, are no more like any insects than a whale is to a blue-bottle. The fact is, coral skeletons look a little like honeycomb, and so we suppose the popular delusion will flourish for ever.